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RESEARCHING RULING-CLASS MEN: BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, LIFE HISTORY

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Abstract

There has been a lot of use of the concept 'hegemonic masculinity' and little discussion of its meaning. Because the problem of distance from and access to men of great wealth and power cannot be resolved through traditional interviewing and participatory observation techniques, this article develops an alternative method by which the masculinity of the hegemonic might be investigated. It argues that the biographies and autobiographies of ruling-class men can be seen as 'found life histories' and that the technique of 'saturation' developed by Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame in the study of life histories can be applied usefully to them. When particular facts in the biographies and autobiographies show up with regularity, then it becomes obvious that certain elements are not due to chance personal characteristics, but are constitutive of the social relations of ruling-class men. The article proposes that it is possible to undertake a sociology of ruling-class masculinity which solves problems of distance and access by using autobiographies and biographies of very rich men and those around them, and which tackles the problem of truthfulness by developing a collective portrait of them through the method of saturation.

Pakulski and Waters (1996, vii) who write that they are 'committed to the view that books about class should no longer be written' must have been rather surprised by the florescence of them in the first part of the nineties—for example, Crompton (1993), Donaldson (1991), Edgell (1993), Esping-Anderson (1993), Hamilton & Hirszowicz (1993), Kerbo & McKinstry (1995), Kuhn & O'Lincoln (1996), McNall, Levine & Fantasia (1991), Miliband (1991), Penelope (1994), Poiner (1990), Pusey (1991), Scase (1992), Westergaard (1995) and Wright (1994). Perhaps we are all a bit slow, and maybe next year we will find, in words of the title of their book, that 'class is dead' and agree with its 'central argument ... that classes are dissolving and that the most advanced societies are no longer class societies' (Pakulski & Waters 1996, 4).

Perhaps not, but as prolific as the work on class continues to be, often it remains within the (now very tedious and old) argument over class boundaries—who is in what class and why, is focused on classes as analytical categories, missing the sense of class as a lived social relation, ignores the salience of class for gender relations and vice versa, and is lacking in a detailed consideration of those whom the class system most benefits.

Perceptive and solid empirical work that fills some of these lacunae includes Gretchen Poiner's (1990) ethnographic study of the New South Wales' rural township of Marulan and Michael Pusey's (1991) study of the top bureaucrats of the Senior Executive Service in Canberra. Poiner (1990, 59, 64, 168) found that while the large landholders in her study were clearly differentiated from the rest of the community and were less committed to it, class consciousness was 'muted and suppressed' especially by the attraction of the land and its ownership. Poiner (1990, 183) and Penelope's (1994) collection have shown how gender relations are critical in 'conferring and defending' the class system. O'Lincoln (Kuhn & O'Lincoln 1996, 5) has made what he calls 'a broad brush portrayal of the ruling class' and the Research and Documentation Centre for Contemporary History of Brazil has been undertaking a study of what it calls the contemporary Brazilian 'elite' revealing it as part of a cohesive community with its own forms of reproduction and self-perpetuation (de Camargo 1981, 193, 194-5).

It is these approaches that I wish to develop by looking at the lives of ruling-class men through their own eyes and the eyes of those close to them. Like Poiner, I hope to situate gender more centrally to the issue of class power rather than on its periphery. 'Kerry's a bloke', says Packer's biographer, Paul Barry, with a 'big black hole inside him', adds his ex-friend, Phillip Adams (Hawley 1993, 10). It is time we sociologists took a closer look at the masculinity of the hegemonic, and sharpened up our use of the term 'hegemonic masculinity' in the process (See Donaldson 1993).

The need to do something with the sociology of power other than study those who have not much of it, and curiosity about the men of the ruling class and their lives are both part of this inquiry, too, as is a keen interest in developing the historical materialist project. As one quite wealthy man, Frederick Engels (1975, 684), remarked more than a hundred years ago: 'History proceeds in such a way that the final result always arises from conflicts between many individual wills and every one of them is in turn made into what it is by a host of particular conditions of life.'

It is the 'particular conditions of life' of men like the Packers, Murdochs, Blacks, that I am concerned about. I want to see how the world seems to those who benefit from rather than pay 'the enormous price tag of history' (Marks 1989, 47), and of course, to have a go at that great conundrum, the extent to which men of great power have some insight into the mechanics of its influence (Hill 1995, 9). Do they comprehend what they do? Are they really what Manning Clark (1991,

16) has called 'the Ha, Ha men ... not distinguished ... for their sensitivity to another man's pain'? Do they know, appreciate, understand the negative effects their actions often have on people not like them? Is this something they learn to cope with, or grow to enjoy?

In confronting this mystery, I hope to unravel the patterns of socio-structural relations underlying the daily processes of the lives of filthy rich blokes, to identify their contradictions (if I can) and to appreciate their dynamics. That is, I want to uncover these patterns by regarding the lives of men 'who live them, who are put in motion by them and who, in turn, make them work and maintain them throughout time' (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 1981, 169).

Individuals' lives are the place in which societal changes are played out and the actions of individuals make up the history of which they are part. 'A political economist might be satisfied with unravelling exploitation and capital accumulation', a sociologist has to 'show what such a relation of production does to men's and women's lives' (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 1981, 171-2). In this endeavour, Elder (1981, 83) has argued that the interpersonal world of family and household is a set of linkages between class position and individual personality. I think this is wrong. Family and household and their complex gender dynamics are constitutive of class relations, exist within them and are one of the key means of their historical continuity. I am hoping to dissolve the dichotomy by which most sociologists place 'structure' 'outside' people, and I hope that this may be possible by examining the lives of those in whose beneficence the social system seems, sometimes almost exclusively, to operate. It is, after all, not so hard to see the social system as somehow separate from, over and against, those it dispossesses. And so, perhaps, it may be possible to see how this system operates 'inside' those it benefits, by exploring the patterns of practice in which they immerse themselves and through which they create the social logic that underlies their own lives.

THE GOOD OLD RULE

So, for these, and other reasons (see Donaldson 1993), looking at those who make and benefit from the rules, whose self-image and experiences are the dominant cultural models, seems to me to be the thing to do. That is, I want to understand how what Gretchen Poiner (1990, ii) (after Wordsworth) has so eloquently called 'the good old rule' by which 'they should take who have the power and they should keep who can', actually works, how those who benefit from this 'simple plan' get to do so and how this benefit is transmitted through time, across the generations.

The difficulties I face in pursuing this goal are basic and profound, for as one who should know, F. Scott Fitzgerald commented, 'Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me' (Thorndike 1976). When J. P. Morgan

died he left an estate of \$68 million and an art collection worth \$50 million. 'And to think', exclaimed Andrew Carnegie, 'he was not a rich man!' (Thorndike 1976, 13). Was Carnegie joking? How would I know? That is the problem in a nutshell.

Or, more precisely, it is one part of a dual problem. On the one hand, and unlike William Shawcross, one of Rupert Murdoch's biographers, who is an old Etonian, son of a Lord and a former British intelligence officer (Nelson 1992, 9), I have plenty of distance from the object of my study—really rich men—and on the other, none at all from my aghast reaction to what I learn about them. Lack of empathy with those one studies has long been seen as problematic by sociologists and anthropologists, and by historians like Eleanor Hancock (1995, 9), a lecturer in modern German history at Monash University, who is critical of the biographer Ralf Georg Reuth for 'maintain[ing] an attitude of detachment towards his subject'. He is 'unsympathetic', she says, and his biography 'gives little sense of Goebbels the man' (1995, 9).

Elsbeth Probyn's (1993, 40) injunction that validity and its usefulness must be tested 'on our own pulses' is one I have always taken seriously. But my pulse races out of control when I realise the money Kerry Packer blew in one weekend at the races would, at my current wage, take me fifty-five years—more than my whole working life—to earn (let alone save) and that at his three day splurge at Las Vegas he gambled with chips each worth more than my home, an amount which would take me more than four of my lifetimes to earn (Walker, Conway & Southward, 1993). Empathy, in this situation, is elusive. Even when it is present, it is not without its own problems. William Shawcross was attacked in London's *Literary Review* for 'having fallen in love with Murdoch' and in both *The New Yorker* and the *Independent on Sunday* he was accused of being 'seduced' by him (Hicks 1992, 2; Henderson 1992, 13).

This distance then means that the prospects of ethnography, participant observation, 'in everyday life the chance meetings along a country road ... participation in informal social events from dinner parties to handwork sessions, and in formal affairs such as meetings of local organisations' (Poiner 1990, 3) are simply not existent for me here. As for interviews such as the 215 undertaken in Pusey's (1991, 33) Canberra study, simply finding ruling-class men who might want me to listen to them, is perhaps my biggest problem. I lack the cultural capital, political clout, economic resources and social contacts this needs. Quite simply, 'Kezza', or any one like him, is not going to want to talk to me. His biographer Paul Barry was rebuffed by Packer and his 'polo manager, Jim Gilmore, added several expletives, then told me how he'd spread my face. I wrote Packer two letters requesting interviews and received a response from his lawyers warning me off and threatening total legal action' (Hawley 1993, 10). His publisher, Judith Curr, received warning letters, too, and 'a lot of people said to me [Curr] that it was either particularly brave or particularly foolish to publish such a book' (Barrowclough 1994, 40).

Direct interviewing like Pusey's or participant observation like Poiner's will necessarily have to await the emergence of sociologically aware class traitors. This is the task for men like Adam Hochschild (1987), journalist and author, son of the chairperson of the Board of a vast mining multinational centred in South Africa whose adult abhorrence of apartheid lead him to question also the construction of his masculinity and to tell a story of his relationship with his father extraordinary in its intensity and perspicacity.

LIFE HISTORIES

But if ethnography and interviews are not possible, there seems yet to be a method suitable to the task. Thomas and Znaniecki (1958, 1918–20), generally thought to be the originators of what has come to be called the life history method, developed it in an attempt to demonstrate that all social becoming can fruitfully be viewed as the product of a continual interaction between individual consciousness and social reality. In this way, humans are both actively producing and continually produced. They thought that because this double relation expressed itself just about everywhere and most of the time, one was able, with this method, to obtain access to the reality of life which produced social categories such as classes (Kohli 1981, 63). Life histories could show how social forces interact at an individual level to form those myriad decisions that cumulatively not only shape each life history itself, but also constitute the direction and scale of major social agencies and their activity (Thompson 1981, 299).

Life histories, too, have advantages over other forms of social inquiry. For instance, this method sometimes involves very few people. Bob Connell's intriguing study of working-class men (Connell 1991) is based on five life histories; his study of men in the environmental movement is based on six (Connell 1990). This is trading off scope for depth, of course (Connell 1995, 89–90). What is important in choosing the people to listen to is that they be aware of, informed about and involved in their cultural world and that they be able to articulate their points of view.

But life histories, at least as conceived by Thomas and Znaniecki (1958), may include not only interviews but also autobiographies, diaries and political memoirs. While each of these is constrained by the purpose for which it was composed and allows only a particular and partial view, they all contain the essential quality of life histories—they span a period of time. 'Life history method always concerns the making of social life through time. It is literally history' (Connell 1995, 89).

Perhaps it is possible, then, to regard autobiographies and biographies as 'found life histories', and of course Sartre had developed this method for a social science of biography—a horizontal and vertical reading of the biography and of the social

system, a movement back and forth from one to the other. This is precisely what Thomas and Znaniecki had thought they were doing. The effort they made to understand a biography in all its uniqueness became the endeavour to interpret a social system, as the phases and processes which mediate each are revealed in their relation to the other (Ferrarotti 1981, 21–2).

But, in theory at least, life histories differ from autobiographies in that the latter are the product of one person, while the former are the product of at least two. Life histories are the product of an interaction, while an autobiography is not (Bertaux 1981a, 8). In life histories, apparently, the narrator resembles an autobiographer, and the researcher a biographer (Catani 1981, 212). According to Marcia Wright (1989, 155), while life histories are mediated by another (while retaining the subject's perspective), autobiographies imply the 'greatest degree of self-control' and biography is the study of one person informed by many sources of various significance.

Yet the very difference of the rich collapses these convenient categories. James Fairfax (1991, vii, viii) in his autobiography, *My Regards to Broadway*, lists sixty-six people who 'kindly agreed to be interviewed or talk to me' or who 'gave ... their frank recollections'. In addition he employed five research assistants who 'provided essential and lucid reports on the areas they covered'. Prince Charles's biographer Jonathan Dimbleby (1994, xii) was assisted by the Prince's personal archivist, the Royal Archivist, the Librarian and Assistant Keeper of the Royal Archives. Even failed Bob Ansett's (1986) autobiography was written with, and its ownership shared by, Bob Pullan, journalist and biographer of the famous. Several hundred people imparted to biographer Paul Barry (1994, vii) their memories of working for the Packers and of meeting or doing business with them over the years, and the Belfield, Hird and Kelly (1991) book on Murdoch draws on, amongst a larger number of other sources, four earlier biographies. In one of those ironies of capitalism, the richer the subjects, the more social is the production of their stories. The lonely vigil of the autobiographer or the one-on-one interaction with the biographer or life-historian is not for them.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY, BIOGRAPHY AND VALIDITY

'We are', remarks Doris Lessing (1995, 14), 'enjoying a golden age of biography. What is better than a really good biography? Not many novels.' She should know. Five biographies had been written about her, and three more were on the way when her autobiography, *Under My Skin*, appeared in 1994. Indeed, there seems to be a 'biography boom' according to Elizabeth Young (1995, 7) in *The Guardian*, in which the 'general attitude of the publishers seems to be "Dead at last? Let the revels begin"', giving the 'unfortunate impression of the deceased ... as carrion beneath a squabbling cloud of vultures, clutching cheques in their scaly, scrabbling claws'. Those who are still alive, though, sometimes fight back. Australian

Democrats' leader Cheryl Kernot, describing Conrad Black as 'boorish and incredibly pretentious', said he 'exemplified all the things that are wrong with absentee landlords'. She was strongly opposed to Black increasing his share of the Fairfax papers 'and did not like him personally—a view strongly reinforced when she read his autobiography' (Burge, Porter, Kitney & Davies 1996, 17). Black (1996, 16) for his part referred to her, whom he'd 'happily never actually met', as 'banal, bumptious, belligerent and clichéd'.

But will any biography or autobiography do? Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* (AD 1) was 'bawdy, gossipy and wholly unreliable' in Young's (1995, 7) view, and this form was soon replaced by the idealised *Lives of the Saints* which remained pre-eminent until Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) which set the pattern for biographies subsequently. But the problems of truthfulness remain. Indeed, as time passes, the divisions between the factual biography and autobiography, and the novel seem to become increasingly blurred. David Thomson's biography of Orson Welles 'smacks a little of fiction' and he considered writing it as a novel, 'but instead he demonstrates how densely reality and fiction become intertwined' (Romney 1996, 14). Donald Horne (1975), on the other hand, has written what he calls a 'sociography' rather than an autobiography, and in it he attempts to show 'what social history can look like when told through *people*', especially the extent to which his 'adolescent revolt' was 'shaped and coloured by social circumstance'.

Then again, Jeffrey Archer has written what he calls a 'novelography' of the lives of Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch ('80% fact, 20% fiction'), based on 'copious research ... I knew Maxwell very well. We were in the House of Commons together ... Murdoch I have known for years too ... I like Rupert. He's a brilliant man. I enjoy his company' (Alderson 1996, 7). And he owned the publishing house that produced the book. Fay Weldon (1996) was impressed. 'You gasp at the nerve of it. Archer, has simply plagiarised their unlikely lives ... [He] presumably knows well—if he says that's how it's done, I'm prepared to believe him. His world, not mine.' But Bernard Crick in *Stranger Than Fiction*, his biography of Archer himself, suggests that Archer has lived a life 'based on half-truths and self-delusion' (Alderson 1996, 7).

Diaries seem safer of course, and are a great source of information. We understand enough about them now to know that those who write them intend them to be read and this poses its own problems. How much does the diarist 'obfuscate, idealise and fictionalise?' asks Susan Chenery (1996, 10s) of Brian Eno's diary. Well, in this case, enough to make the diaries 'slightly contrived ... 'too clever' to provide 'an insight into the actual man', she thinks. (But how does she know that?)

This difficulty of *verstehen* is an old one, of course, and as Chenery (1996, 10s) suggests the problem is not all that different when dealing with oneself. 'How do you know that what you remember is more important than what you don't?' asks Lessing (1995, 12, 13). 'Not only the perspective but what you are looking at

changes.' We always encounter a more or less unconscious *post festa* ideologising of past life events, a reshaping and re-evaluation of life according to the special life circumstances of the respondents be they ourselves or someone we are listening to (Karpati 1981, 136). 'We make up our pasts. You can actually watch your mind doing it, taking a little fragment of fact and then spinning a tale out of it' (Lessing 1995, 13).

But even the great technical problems of recall and reconstruction pale before someone like Simone de Beauvoir who said that about some things she had no intention of telling the truth. And Lessing: 'Telling the truth about yourself is one thing, if you can, but what about the other people? ... I do not believe it is the duty of friends, lovers, comrades to tell all' (Lessing 1995, 11).

But at least, I suppose, we can say that Lessing and de Beauvoir are not telling a truth that they know can be told. Others seem disdainful of this:

We knew that fundamental truths were embedded and reflected in women's experiences as revealed in their life stories ... We developed a healthy disdain for reductionist approaches that would have us determine the 'truth' of a woman's words solely in terms of their exact factual accuracy, the representativeness of her social circumstances, or the reliability of her memory when it was tested against 'objective' sources (Personal Narratives Group 1989, 14).

Compared with history, autobiography is 'freely explorative and open-ended ... personal and experiential' (Colmer 1989, 159). Yet writers of biographies, autobiographies and tellers of life histories are not free to invent situations and characters, dialogue and plot as novelists are. 'Truth matters' as Bob Cornell (1995, 31) somewhat laconically remarked. In dealing with ruling-class men, I want to use their insights into their world, their sense of their place in it, their understanding of themselves as men as they move in it and shape it. I want to make this collective picture as accurate as I can, in ways that are not 'reductionist' but are rich in nuance and subjectivity, but are in some sense reliable and representative of the men they are and of the men like them.

TRUTHFULNESS, SATURATION AND STRUCTURE

Thomas and Znaniecki emphasised the sincerity of autobiographies produced in their project on the proletarianisation of émigré Polish peasants (Kohli 1981, 69) and see it as at least some protection against deception. Speaking or writing 'from the heart' may be preferable to its opposite, yet Ronald Fraser (1979) the author of an excellent oral history of the Spanish Civil War, was worried that people may sincerely believe what is untrue (Elder 1981, 110).

The Watergate conspiracy produced an unusual answer to the dilemma of oral testimonies. In one study of corporate executives, the sociologists used what they

called 'the Woodward-Bernstein principle of verification. Two independent sources had to validate or confirm an observation before we took it as a social fact or common understanding' (Denzin 1981, 155). But I think it is really Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame who are most helpful in the matter, through their development of the notion of saturation. Their view is that one must try to diversify as much as possible the cases observed until what they call 'saturation' occurs. When certain elements show up with regularity, when it becomes obvious that certain facts are not due to chance personal characteristics, then one has done a valid study. Subsequent life stories again and again revealed for them the same elements, which soon appeared characteristic not of the respondents, but of their social relations. Stories were told once, confirmed, reconfirmed again and again. 'Every new life story was confirming what the preceding ones had shown. Again and again we were collecting the same story ... What was happening was a process of saturation: on it rests the validity of our sociological assumptions. One life story is only one life story ... Several life stories taken from the same set of socio-structural relations support each other and make up altogether a strong body of evidence' (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 1981, 187).

Life stories can be checked against one another, solving the problem of truthfulness (Bertaux 1981a, 9). 'It took us about fifteen life stories to begin perceiving the saturation process; we did fifteen more and confirmed it ... By then the structural pattern had become quite clear to us' (Bertaux & Bertaux-Wiame 1981). They stopped at thirty, Bertaux (1981b, 37, 40) saying that 'there was no point going further' for 'the invisible but ever present level of social relations' had been revealed.

Indeed, I want to take the matter a little further, too, if I can. While trying to move beyond the tiresome and abstracted debate over class boundaries by choosing to examine those who are nowhere near the boundary (male millionaires from at least three generations of wealth perhaps), I hope also to draw upon those who are less central to the class for their views of those who are most powerful within it. Patrick White (1983, 153, 57, 151) whose family came to Australia 'generations earlier and were granted great tracts of land' placed himself in the practice of his art and his sexuality in a more marginal position from which, for instance, he lampooned members of his class, including Lady Mary Fairfax and Dame Leonie Kramer. 'An artist in the family tree was almost like a sodomite', he remarks rather dryly. 'I have never been able to enjoy what any 'normal' member of my parents' class considers his right. What is seen as success, my own included, has often filled me with disgust'. So much so, that his 'militant irony ... on the bourgeoisie *en bloc* ... tends to become strident sarcasm' (Myers 1978, 2). His accounts of his relationships with the servants of his childhood are riveting.

Donald Horne's (1985) view of Sir Frank Packer who sacked him, is amusing and quite different to that of Al 'Chainsaw' Dunlap whose father was an 'often unemployed' shipyard worker. The sense Dunlap has of Kerry Packer who hired him for a few years 'to do some serious corporate pruning' differs too from that

of the 'hangers-on and sycophants who surrounded Packer because he was rich and powerful'. 'I fired entire boards of directors, men and women who had been very close to Packer, very big personalities in Australia and Europe', he boasted in his recent book (Attwood 1996, 83) (which, incidentally, according to the *Financial Review's* Trevor Sykes (1996, 3) is a 'perfect textbook on management essentials').

Judy Cassab (1995), the portraitist for the rich and famous, has some interesting things to say in her diaries. She and her husband, Jancsi, were invited to dine at the Murdochs' place, Cavan, 'in a huge tent, worthy of the Shah of Iran', along with the Howards, Hawkes, Keatings, Wrans, Capons, James Mollison, Dame Leonie Kramer and others. 'Later at home, Jancsi said that it's like Genghis Khan vanquishing the government, and everybody bows, worships, pays court and genuflects.'

Briefly, then, I want to do a sociology of ruling-class masculinity which solves the problem of distance and access by using autobiographies and biographies of the men themselves and those around them and which tackles the problem of truthfulness by developing a collective portrait of them through the method of saturation. Will this method do justice to the processes of gender and class and their living relationships?

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